Strategizing through playful design

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S trategic planning has been associated with a rational, objective, structured, analytical and convergent mindset that most executives consider abstract and distant from their daily work. Strategic thinking on the other hand has often been seen as complementing planning by involving a creative, divergent and synthetic mindset and associated practices (Heracleous, 1998). While the technologies and frameworks of strategic planning have been highly developed and refined over time, the creative processes of strategic thinking remain a fragmented group of approaches with diverse conceptual homes.

A view of strategizing as a process of design is in essence an analogical process, the use of metaphor where knowledge from the source domain (in this case design thinking), is mapped onto the target domain (in this case the strategy process), with the aim of gaining insights that would have been difficult to gain otherwise. If the two domains are sufficiently different for a creative tension to exist, as in this case, the insights are likely to be more fruitful.

We propose a view of strategizing as a playful design practice and illustrate this view by describing a process for fostering effective strategic play. We next outline the benefits of the process and finally address how executives can play effectively. Our overall message is that strategizing through playful design can be a useful and productive complement to dry, conventional strategic planning processes that helps to open up and orient fruitful debate about an organization's particular strategic challenges.

Design thinking and strategic practice

According to architect Bryan Lawson, there is little consensus in the design field about what the term ''design'' means and there is by no means a universal design model (Lawson, 2006). Both a noun and a verb, design can both refer to an end product as well as to the processes involved. Thus the source domain of architectural design is itself fragmented. Nevertheless, Lawson's attempt at an integrated model suggests that one of the most effective means for designers to provide structure to ill-structured problems is by generating narratives or stories to reframe these problems. They also employ various techniques and materials to externalize their ideas and thoughts through models, sketches or prototypes. These physical two- and three-dimensional representations are not simply outcomes of an abstract thought process, but pivotal inputs that provide a physical stimulus for conversations about the emergent ideas they embody; and in turn workable, creative solutions to the relevant design challenges. These models and prototypes provide designers with a basis for developing initial ideas about solutions very early on in the process, sometimes even before they have fully understood the problem.

Evaluating alternative design options requires designers to integrate objective/technical as well as subjective/aesthetic judgments in making choices among competing prototypes.

This is facilitated by the models and prototypes that integrate the emergent ideas into a relatively coherent story. Thus, design processes rely fundamentally on the practice of creating models or prototyping as a process of recursively stabilizing and elaborating a physical artifact while the narrative or story triggered by it unfolds.

Playful design as a practice of strategizing: an example

A technique that exemplifies ''strategizing through playful design'' is the crafting of embodied metaphors. The technique combines a facilitated playful mode of interaction with the emergent, group-oriented design of three-dimensional models to assist in strategic sense making. In other words, individuals explore their strategic issues through a group process of sense making that involves the design of real artifacts that are metaphors in the flesh. These designs tell stories that become explicit when the structures are decoded and made sense of by the group that built them. The stories spur conversations and generative dialogues about the strategic challenges that the group faces.

In early 2003, for example, the CEO of a Swiss-based private banking group planned to launch a major strategic initiative for the group's overall go-to-market strategy (Jacobs and Heracleous, 2006). The initiative, labeled ''I know my banker,'' aimed to fulfill the bank's aspiration to provide a more customer-focused private banking service that would differentiate the bank's positioning and customer interaction but would be serviced behind the scenes with standardized banking products, as was the norm. To kick off the initiative, and as a prelude to implementation, the CEO invited department heads and their direct reports to a one-day retreat to familiarize them with the concept of ''I know my banker'' and to align management thinking with this concept. The workshop was designed to let participants explore dialogically, creatively and in an emergent fashion this concept and its consequences in more detail so that by the workshop's conclusion, shared mental maps on this theme would develop and coordinated actions would take shape.

Aided by the process of playful strategizing, the participants started designing what they thought the concept ''I know my banker'' meant to them. During the design process they engaged in intense debates; while some for example had assumed that aspects of the private banking service could potentially benefit all of the bank's customers, others kept emphasizing that this initiative should only be applied to a carefully selected segment of the organization's customer base. Further, while some participants took the concept at face value and speculated on ways that would encourage customers to actually get to know their bankers better, and what that might mean for them as bankers, others followed a more traditional, instrumental path along a ''know your customer'' logic. Finally, while some participants argued that ''I know my banker'' was all about technical systems, customer relationship marketing or data mining, others viewed the concept as a way to build closer relationships and trust with clients. The designs, or ''embodied metaphors'' built were a potent way to surface and debate these assumptions.

For example, a construction presenting the bank as a complicated machine bigger than the client's space and the banker-client relationship as the need to match offerings to clients' demands (Figure 1) contrasted with a construction portraying the banker-client relationship as a progressively closer, developmental process ultimately leading to deep mutual understanding (Figure 2). The former was a technocratic, mechanistic, transactional interpretation of the strategic initiative ''I know my banker'' while the latter was an anthropocentric, developmental, relationship-oriented understanding.

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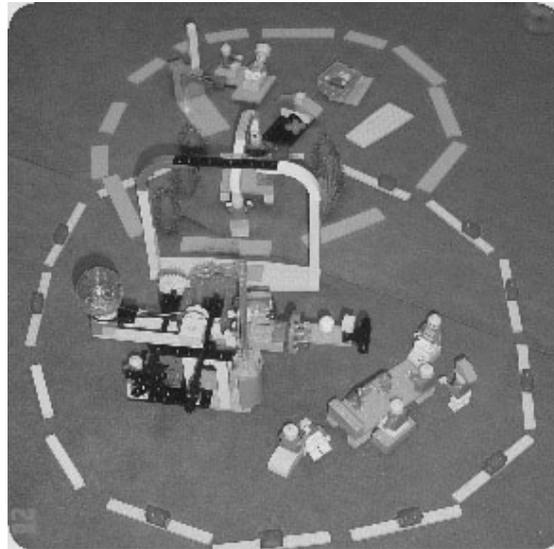
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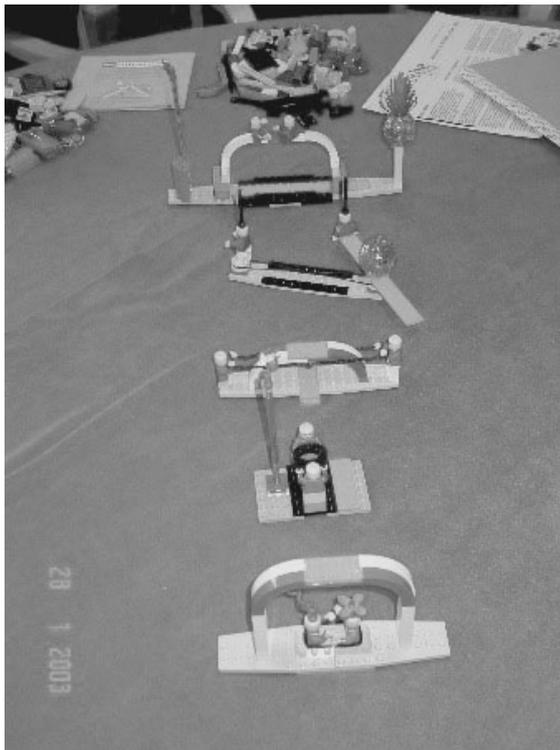
Source: Jacobs and Heracleous (2006)

These strategic conversations occasioned through a process of strategizing through playful design had a significant impact on subsequent bank strategic actions. The CEO acknowledged the lack of shared understandings and subsequently requested the head of marketing to postpone the launch of the initiative and to reconsider and redesign the entire ''I know my banker'' program – this time within a more inclusive process, through close collaboration with the heads of departments as well as some workshop attendees. After a few months, the initiative was introduced more smoothly than would otherwise have been the case.

What we have seen in this workshop that used the technique of producing emergent designs or crafting embodied metaphors as we have elsewhere described this practice (Jacobs and Heracleous, 2006; see also Heracleous and Jacobs, 2005) illustrates and manifests several aspects of strategizing as playful design. The process revealed that the new go-to-market strategy, on the surface a simple concept, when examined more deeply was in fact a complex problem with contradictory perspectives and interpretations giving rise to different narratives. What is interesting from a practice point of view is that these diverse interpretations of the concept would likely lead to implementation problems as the action-oriented implications of the understandings would either implicitly support or challenge the officially sanctioned implementation plan.

Further, the projective technique of crafting embodied metaphors employed alternative media to represent the strategic issues. While initially participants might have been reluctant to use construction toy materials to represent their ideas, the playful process facilitated a smooth uptake of the unusual material. This in turn enhanced the expressive spectrum of participants.

Further, the process rendered different viewpoints and narratives literally visible and made them accessible to further critical exploration. The variety of interpretations in the different models show evidence of parallel lines of thinking that do not lead immediately and in a linear fashion to a preferred or ideal solution but rather triggered further debate and helped participants ask the right questions. Since one of the aims of the workshop had been to transcend metric, convergent strategic thinking, such a process invited and educated participants in the practice of holistic, aesthetic judgment. Rather than conventional, analytical skills, the designed models call for synthetic, divergent readings of the metaphors they embody and the stories they tell.

Finally, the intervention allowed participants not only to metaphorically develop their vision of ''I know my banker'' and of their organization's desired future state, but also to actually take the three-dimensional designs to their organization as prototypes to help them critically reflect on their past actions as well as principles and understandings that should guide their future actions.

Benefits of strategizing through playful design

Strategizing through playful design allows companies to address a wide range of strategic challenges, which are built into the brief for the process. For instance, when a mobile telephony's strategy team reviewed the implications of their recently having been acquired by a main state-owned competitor, they realized thus far neglected, impending competitive threats, which in turn triggered a critical reflection on the firm's brand positioning. When engaging in playful design processes after being split over the strategic relevance of their company's after-sales activities, the senior management team of a food packaging firm appreciated their relevance and subsequently discussed strategic options for developing world-class after sales processes. Finally, a newly formed regional management team of a global software firm that was not well integrated was able to start defining a shared identity and platform for debating differences as a basis for improving future lateral collaboration. What all the above examples have in common is that the process of playful design enabled them to address pressing strategic issues in a productive manner.

Thus, strategizing through playful design can deliver insights and potential shifts in managers' mind sets by providing a context where senior teams can surface and debate

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contentious or critical management issues, by ''concretizing'' these issues into ''embodied metaphors'' that are imbued with meaning and that can be debated from a variety of perspectives. It is precisely its potential to induce rich imagery and stories triggered by the models that facilitates the development of a memorable shared language for the future and that can even feed into and inform more formalized forms of strategizing. Furthermore, strategizing through playful design creates a sense of involvement and ownership that not only facilitates effective team building among senior managers but also aids implementation of the directions that emerge from the debates. Such a process can also help in identifying necessary revisions in strategy, in the implementation plan, or even highlight the need to garner political support before any initiatives. Since the process tends to surface dissonances rather than (false) consonances, strategizing through playful design helps to identify potential road-blocks to effective strategy implementation.

How to play effectively

Given the potential benefits, how then can organizations effectively engage in strategizing through playful design? We should stress at this stage that strategizing through playful design complements rather than substitutes for conventional practices of strategizing. Clearly, after the creative strategizing, there is the need to diverge to a more planning-oriented mindset and develop an implementation plan with the relevant features (actions, timescales, critical success factors, accountabilities). Strategizing through playful design on the other hand is particularly suited to early stages of strategy development as well as strategy review processes where more exploratory, divergent and synthetic processes and thinking modes are needed, rather than more formal, convergent and conventional ones.

It is important that if the CEO or other individuals from the top team are involved in the process, they should role-model the inclusive philosophy of strategizing through playful design by being mindful of any defensive or dominating behaviors that they exhibit. Participants may be sub-consciously picking up cues about what the CEO wants to hear, therefore producing corresponding designs that would not take full advantage of the potential of the process. A skilled facilitator can help to foster healthy and productive discussions in this respect by ensuring balanced participation in the design process and encouraging a meaningful, yet critical probing into the designs.

To play effectively, resources such as adequate space and time are essential since rushed sessions lose their impact dramatically. We found that anything less than a full day does not allow participants to get in a productive, creative play ''zone,'' to debate the issues in depth, and to allow for a robust discussion of actions and other future directions. For specific aspects of strategy to be addressed (such as the level of integration of a regional team or the relevance of after sales service), one to two days would be needed. To address an organization's whole strategy (that would include issues of positioning, growth avenues, product/market choices, resource and capability development), three to four days would be needed, with a significant part of this time at the end of the workshop period devoted to discussion of implications and action planning (the more convergent and conventional modes of strategy making).

Turning to process design features, strategizing through playful design follows four iterative stages that operate at both individual and collective levels and gradually build up to detailed conversations on the core strategic issues and challenges as perceived by participants. First, participants are invited to construct and then debrief their individual constructions on

the goal of the workshop. Second, the groups are invited to integrate their individual constructions into an initial collective prototype to eliminate redundancies but retain differences and diversity. This latter step represents the central part of the process since consonances and dissonances in terms of the strategic issue are exchanged and negotiated – much like iterative, recursive industrial design processes. Third, in a recurring cycle of steps one and two, individual then collective models of key stakeholders and their relationships to the core construction supplement the emergent strategic prototype. Finally, the overall construction is debriefed and probed by means of ''what-if'' scenarios suggested by participants themselves, which in turn generate narratives that help participants make sense of the issues and challenges facing them and explore strategic options.

A further key element of playing effectively is the clarity and adequacy of the design assignment of the group. This should be broad enough to address an issue of strategic relevance while also being specific enough so that designs can draw on participants' practical experience and subsequently inform this experience. The process can be carried out with a variety of materials, ranging from mundane office objects to plasticine to construction toy materials. Some of the materials might be considered more ''neutral'' than others. In view of time considerations, their connectivity, and their potential for constituting elaborate and meaningful designs, however, we have preferred in the past to employ construction toy materials (including those with preconfigured meaning such as animals, bridges or person figures).

Thus, strategizing through playful design, when appropriately structured and resourced, gives strategists an effective means of exploring their strategic challenges and agreeing on desired directions. It complements the structured, rationalist flavor of strategic planning by enabling participants to engage in creative, generative, divergent thinking about issues that keep them awake at night and gives them the opportunity of coming up with different answers from their competitors, an essential prerequisite to competitive advantage.

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